

EPA wants to remove asbestos-laden insulation from Libby homes

The problem at a glance

Of 263 homes and commercial properties investigated, 62 percent had asbestos levels of 1 percent or greater in one or more samples of an outdoor soil in yards, gardens, waste piles or driveways.

Indoor dust samples were much less likely to contain asbestos fibers. Fibers were detected in 13 percent, or 33 out of 261 dust samples collected.

By LYNNETTE HINTZE
The Daily Inter Lake

Results of a home and yard risk assessment in Libby will lay the groundwork for a federal proposal to remove asbestos-contaminated vermiculite insulation from hundreds of Libby-area homes.

Extensive sampling last

year revealed asbestos fibers in 73 percent of the vermiculite insulation samples taken, with asbestos concentrations as high as 5 percent. One percent is the federal benchmark.

Paul Peronard, on-site coordinator in Libby for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, said he will state his case for Zonolite insulation removal

in a report to agency headquarters next week.

He's pushing the agency to declare a public-health emergency in Libby, the regulatory step needed to give the agency the go-ahead to remove the insulation.

Libby is an epicenter of asbestos contamination following decades of vermiculite mining, first by Zonolite Corp. and later by

W.R. Grace & Co., that produced the ore needed to make Zonolite insulation.

Asbestos was a toxic byproduct blamed for widespread death and sickness among Libby-area residents. The mine closed in 1990, but lingering contamination is now the focus of a Superfund cleanup.

While the health emergency declaration would

allow the agency to remove home insulation in Libby as a special case, Peronard acknowledges that the precedent-setting move raises questions about what to do with up to 15 million homes across the country that contain Zonolite insulation.

About 800 homes would be included in the Libby

See LIBBY on Page A3

Emergency declaration may clear way for cleanup

LIBBY/From A1

insulation removal, at an approximate cost of \$3,000 to \$20,000 per home.

The public-health emergency declaration has been in the works since September, when EPA Administrator Christine Whitman traveled to Libby to listen to community concerns. U.S. Rep. Denny Rehberg, R-Mont, also broached the idea, saying Libby's plight is unique.

W.R. Grace officials are scheduled to meet with the EPA on Jan. 31 to talk about the proposal.

Peronard's recommendations are based on a recently completed

risk assessment by EPA toxicologist Chris Weis.

Weis concluded that source materials like soil, dust and insulation that contain asbestos are a likely source of ongoing release of hazardous fibers in indoor and outdoor air at homes and businesses in Libby.

"Actual risks may be even greater than estimated," Weis said.

The EPA used polarized light microscopy to evaluate soil and insulation samples, and relied on transmission electron microscopy for dust samples.

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percent or greater in one or more samples of an outdoor soil in yards, gardens, waste piles or driveways.

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A noteworthy finding, Peronard said, is that two-thirds of the fibers detected in Libby aren't fibers included in the risk assessment.

"They're typically shorter and in some cases wider," he said about the excluded fibers. "The overall theory has been the shorter the fiber, the better the body clears them out. But we don't have anything to sug-

gest that short fibers don't pose a risk."

Both Peronard and Weis say they believe risk estimates produced by the study might be low, because tests are based on data for chrysotile asbestos, the kind used in products like pipe wrapping and brake linings.

The amphibole asbestos found in vermiculite ore mined near Libby is considered more hazardous, but little data exists on which to base an assessment.

The study concluded that even the lowest amphibole concentration tested (0.001 percent) was still capable of producing measurable airborne asbestos concentrations.



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